

Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1869

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

In early September 1869, the four-month long strike by the D&H miners, in support of an initiative by the coal operators and miners in Schuylkill County came to an end. The miners at the Avondale Colliery in Plymouth Township, Luzerne County (the colliery was owned by the Steuben Coal Company and leased by the Delaware and Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company), among many others, agreed to go back to work, and did so, on Monday September 6, 1869.

The wooden breaker at the Avondale Colliery (built in 1867 at a cost of \$130,000 was capable of processing about 500 tons of coal daily; coal extracted by the use of the chamber and pillar method of mining; over 450,000 feet of lumber were used to wall the shaft and build the 60-foot high breaker. (The 327-foot-deep shaft allowed access to the 9-foot Red Ash Vein, which yielded a commercially desirable grade of anthracite. The shaft was partitioned into two sections. One section was reserved for upcast ventilation provided by a furnace; essentially, the upcast shaft was used as a chimney, with the hot exhaust gases drawing air up and out of the mine.)

The breaker, it should be noted, in order to save the expense of hauling the coal from the mine to the breaker, was situated directly over the shaft, on the side hill, 50 to 60 feet higher than the tracks of the Bloomsburg Railroad below. About 200 workers were employed at the colliery, with the workforce being predominantly Welsh.

That morning, September 6, 1869, a fire that originated, some people “allege”, in a furnace at the bottom of the 327-foot shaft, broke out around 10:30 AM. The furnace, located well over 100 feet from the shaft but connected to it by a flue, was said by some to be the source of ignition. The flames traveled up the wood-reinforced shaft and engulfed the entire wooden structure up to the headhouse, 60 feet above the headframe. As the fire increased, it attracted hundreds of people, especially families of trapped miners. The crowd eventually grew to almost ten thousand bystanders.

William Kashatus, in his column for the *Citizens' Voice* of August 31, 2008, described the fire as follows: “The fire quickly roared up the Steuben Shaft (the only exit and entrance to the mine) into the engine room of the breaker, setting off a tremendous explosion. It spread so rapidly that the neighboring buildings were immediately engulfed. Telegraph operators put out a call to fire companies in every small town from Plymouth to Scranton. As pumbers and water wagons arrived by train, family and friends of the miners rushed to the scene, horrified by the terrible sight. By mid-afternoon, firefighters were pumping a constant stream of water into a tunnel and down the shaft. At 6 p. m., a small dog and a lighted lamp were sent down in a bucket to test the safety of the burned-out shaft. When the dog arrived [back at the surface] alive, a small group of volunteers took its place in the bucket, taking turns descending the shaft. Volunteers Thomas W. Williams and David Jones were overcome by toxic gas and became the first of the many victims whose bodies were recovered when the calamitous fire was finally extinguished. Charles Jones of Plymouth and Stephen Evans of Nottingham Shaft were later selected to be lowered into the mine. Equipped with tools such as a hatchet and a hook.

“The search continued for the next few days. In the early morning of Wednesday, September 8, researchers descended 300 feet below ground and came upon and entered a closed brattice [a makeshift barrier of coal, rock, scrap wood, mud, and canvas; the brattice was constructed by the desperate and trapped miners in an attempt to stop the infiltration of blackdamp, in the hope of surviving on cleaner deep mine air until rescue). When the rescuers pierced the brattice, they encountered a view which appalled the stoutest heart among them. Grouped together, in every possible position, laid the dead bodies of sixty-seven men and boys grouped together, including William R. Evans and his three sons, two in his arms and one at his feet. Another 41 dead laborers were found in groups and individually in other areas of the mine, having fled as far as possible from the burning shaft.”

That day, September 6, 1869, 103 men, 5 boys, and 2 rescuers, died of asphyxiation of carbonic gases. As such, 72 women became widows, and 153 children lost their fathers; a church in Plymouth, PA, lost every one of its male members. To this day, the Avondale mine disaster remains the worst disaster in the history of anthracite mining in northeastern Pennsylvania.

On September 10, Pennsylvania governor, John W. Geary, as well as six high ranking D&H officials (Thomas Dickson, President; Coe F. Young, Rollin Manville, E. W. Weston, and Horace G. Young) traveled to Avondale to speak to officials there and to offer their condolences to the families of the victims. Within months of the tragedy, Pennsylvania enacted America's first mine safety law. Among other things, it required mines to have more than one exit, set standards for ventilation and forbid the building of breakers atop mine shafts.

How did the fire start? Two explanations emerged from the testimony given to a coroner’s jury. As we noted above, some few people believed that the fire was accidentally started by a spark from the coal-fired ventilating furnace at the foot of the Avondale mine shaft. Many others maintained that someone purposely set the fire from the tunnel that intersected the shaft 40 feet below the surface.

The Jury chose the “spark-from-the-furnace” cause. Objective, non-biased individuals and organizations (the *New York Times*, the *Scranton Tribune*, many from Scranton’s very large Welsh community) criticized the verdict, and argued for arson. They asked whether it was just a coincidence that the tragedy occurred only a few days after the Avondale workers helped break a three-month, region-wide strike, and that the great majority of the Irish workers (who strongly supported the strike) were absent from the pit on the day of the fire? Present-day historians regard the fire as arson.

The Avondale calamity was a tragic consequence of the widespread disharmony in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania between the Welsh and the Irish communities there. In the 1830s, it will be recalled, the D&H recruited 90 Welsh families and brought them to Carbondale in order to show the D&H (officials and miners) how to mine, professionally, anthracite coal. Thus instructed by the Welsh, D&H mining and shipping numbers increased dramatically (1829, 7,000 tons; 1830, 43,000 tons; 1831, 54,000 tons; 1832, 84,600 tons; 1833, 111,777 tons).

The root cause of this disharmony in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania was the fact that the Welsh in the anthracite mines were the bosses (the managerial level and the miners)

and the Irish were the workers (the laborers). To be qualified as a “miner”, one had to pass an exam and be awarded a “Certificate of Competency” before one could be classed as a “Miner” and hired by one of the coal companies. A certified miner then hired—and paid—a “Laborer” to assist him (the miner) as he mined coal.

The bodies of 61 of the men and boys killed in the fire at Avondale were interred in the Hyde Park Cemetery on Washburn Street in West Scranton (the largest Welsh community in the world outside of Wales and, said Professor Bill Jones, “one of the most distinctive Welsh communities that ever existed.” In the late nineteenth century, the city of Scranton was known as the Welsh Athens of America because of the richness of its Welsh cultural life.

Up to 10,000 people were in the Hyde Park Cemetery for the graveside services, which were conducted in Welsh. The names of the 57 Welsh men and boys interred that day in the Hyde Park Cemetery are: “Thomas Morris, Thomas Davies, John Burch, John Burch, Jr., William Powell, James Powell, William Harding, William L. Williams, Edward Bowen, William D. Jones, Morgan Watkins, Richard Woolley, William J. Evans, Edward Edwards, William Porfit, John Jenkins, John D. Evans, William J. Davies, James T. Williams, John J. Thomas, Thomas Hatton, William Hatton, Thomas D. Jones, Daniel D. Jones, David Thomas, Thomas L. Jones, Thomas Hughes, John Hughes.

“William Lewis, Samuel R. Morgan, Evan Rees, Henry Morris, James Phillips, David J. Rees, David Rees, William Rees, William T. Morgan, Lewis Davies, Rees Lumley, Joseph Morris, John E. Thomas, Thomas Llewellyn, Rees Llewellyn, John Harris, Richard Owen, William R. Rees, William Evans, Methusalem Evans, William Evans, Lewis Evans, William R. Evans, William Bowen, Rowland Jones, Evan Hughes, John Bowen, Thomas Phillips, Willie Phillips.”

Other cemeteries where the earthly remains of Avondale victims are interred: Shupp’s Cemetery in Plymouth, Cemetery at Pittston, Cemetery at Forty Fort, Cathedral Cemetery in Hyde Park, Summit Hill Cemetery, Catholic Cemetery in Wilkes-Barre.

At the time of the Avondale Mine Disaster, the best pictorial artists of the day, especially those from the top metropolitan newspapers and periodicals, were dispatched directly to the actual scene of the calamity to record in their sketchbooks the minutest details of the locality and of the victims and the bereaved mining community in the Wyoming Valley of Pennsylvania. Among those artists were G. W. Bradford and Joseph Becker, artists of Frank Leslie’s *Leslie’s Weekly*, and Theodore Russell Davis (1840-1894) of *Harper’s [Magazine]*. Shown here is “The Avondale Colliery Disaster—Bringing Out the Dead” by Theodore R. Davis, which was published in *Harper’s Magazine*, September 25, 1869.

Here, from the *Scranton Weekly Republican* of Saturday, September 11, 1869, is the account of Davis' visit to Avondale at the time of the disaster: "**DAVIS AND AVONDALE** / Arriving at the scene of the Avondale calamity on the morning of September 8, 1869, just as the first bodies of the mining victims were being brought up to the tunnel entrance for identification and burial, Davis almost overwhelmed by the enormity and defenselessness of this great local tragedy, took his stand near the center of each scene of the unfolding drama, and etched in his sketchbook the priceless set of ten sketches which first appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*, Saturday, September 25 and Saturday,

October 2, 1869. For accuracy in landscape, period wearing apparel, mining equipment and the actual moments of anguish and grief of individual groups of the stricken mining community, the drawings of Davis are unsurpassed.

There were two very important consequences of this tragedy at Avondale: (1) the Pennsylvania General Assembly mandated, among other things, that there must be at least two entrances to all underground mines, (2) thousands of miners joined the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, (one of the first unions to represent coal miners in the United States) founded in 1868 by John Siney). Tragically, and ironically, the WBA had successfully petitioned the Pennsylvania State Legislature for the passage of a new mine safety act, which became law on April 12, 1868. The law codified ventilation requirements and stipulated the presence of a second entrance, in accord with contemporary British practice. That act did not apply to mines in Luzerne County (where Avondale is located), due to the efforts of George Turner, the Democratic state senator from Luzerne County.

Memorial services are held regularly both at the Avondale Mine Site and in the Hyde Park Cemetery. Prayers for the dead are offered. Hymns are sung in Welsh. In some years, Welsh men and women from Wales come to America to participate in these ceremonies in memory of the 110 Welsh men and boys who died on September 6, 1869.

(End of Part 2 of *Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields*. To be continued in the November 2023 issue of this publication.)

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